

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

101412Z Nov 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001545

SIPDIS

FOR AF/S BRUCE NEULING, PASS TO VOA DIRECTOR DAVID JACKSON FROM  
AMBASSADOR DELL

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958

TAGS: [AMGT](#)

SUBJECT: OFFICIAL INFORMAL

1. (SBU) I am writing regarding the terrific program that VOA is broadcasting in Zimbabwe under the Studio 7 brand. The program is among our best tools for promoting free expression in a country where supporters of democracy battle daily to defend democratic principles. It provides objective news and other information to Zimbabweans, most of whom only have access to the propaganda churned out by the state-controlled media. A recent nationwide survey, conducted by a Zimbabwean firm affiliated with the Gallup Polling Group, determined that some 300,000 Zimbabweans listen to the program daily, greatly exceeding our initial expectations. Credit for this success goes to the exceptional work of your Zimbabwean and American staff in Washington, and the courageous Studio 7 reporters on the ground here.

2. (SBU) Based on our on-the-ground experience and the recent survey data, we have made a number of recommendations over the past year to make the program even better and more accessible to the general public. These included reducing coverage of non-Zimbabwe news, expanding broadcast time in native languages, reducing the amount of music, and receiving listener feedback. I am pleased that discussions between staff in Harare and VOA ultimately resulted in many of them being adopted. Given the quickly evolving nature of Zimbabwe's political and social environment, it is important that these kinds of discussions continue and that we remain open to dialogue about how Studio 7 can adapt over time to be relevant and effective.

3. (SBU) The survey revealed a number of additional opportunities of which we can take advantage to keep the program fresh and relevant. I urge the Studio 7 management to work closely with my team at USAID/Zimbabwe to address these opportunities. I understand that VOA recently completed its own listenership survey of Studio 7. It would be useful for us to see the survey's results and jointly discuss its implications for programming. Listed below are some of the opportunities we have identified regarding Studio 7.

-- Flexible Programming. Zimbabwe is a high profile, politically complex country, with the terrain changing quickly and often. For the program to remain relevant and cutting edge, it is critical that it remains flexible and adjusts accordingly. In this context, specific programming ideas we have suggested recently include regular reporting on HIV/AIDS, civic education, person-on-the-street interviews, and a routine spot on producer/commodity prices. While some initial steps have been taken, it would be useful to learn what plans VOA management has to broadcast these types of stories and the timeframe envisioned.

-- Promotion. Getting the word out about Studio 7 has been a constraint due to a tight budget situation. However, there is enormous potential for expanding the listener base, as the survey pointed out that 49% of Zimbabwe's general population has never even heard of the program. To address the issue, we have assumed responsibility for advertising from Zimbabwe. Yet, tie-ins to this promotional effort through on-the-air promotions and listener feedback are necessary and we are seeking proactive inputs from VOA management. We will shortly be doing an SMS advertising campaign and are actively seeking VOA input. It would be particularly useful if VOA identified a point person for USAID to work with on promotional activities.

-- Rural Coverage. Reaching rural Zimbabweans who are isolated from the international media was our initial impetus for asking VOA to create Studio 7. A key means of attracting rural listeners is providing coverage from rural areas. VOA agreed to increase stringer compensation for rural stories months ago to compensate for the additional travel costs, but this appears not to have happened. We would appreciate support from VOA management in implementing an appropriate compensation package to ensure that stringers have an incentive to file rural stories.

-- Compensation. Adequate compensation for local stringers is a concern, given hyper-inflation, lack of fuel and related transport problems. As you may know, Zimbabwe has the unenviable status of having perhaps the world's highest inflation, exacerbated by a government-controlled foreign exchange system, so costs in Zimbabwe are disproportionate to what VOA experiences

in other countries. As has been discussed among our respective staff's, an informal survey should be undertaken as soon as possible to ensure that payment is competitive. As you can imagine, compensation issues have the potential to affect morale and, ultimately, staff performance.

-- Editorials. Given the GOZ's disinformation campaigns concerning US policy, VOA editorials play an important role in clarifying our position. It is important that we maintain the good collaboration we have enjoyed on preparing VOA editorials to ensure that they: a) focus on facts; and b) highlight perpetrators of abuse. We especially encourage stories on symptoms and anecdotes of the country's economic decline and mismanagement, which resonate especially strongly here.

-- Communication. Our local and American staff in the Embassy and USAID are involved in monitoring the democratic process in Zimbabwe on a daily basis and, thus, have solid insights into the pulse of the general population. Therefore, it would be useful for them to have periodic, i.e. quarterly, telephone discussions with the Studio 7 Washington-based staff and reporters. This would allow both groups to share insights about Zimbabwe's dynamic environment. The purpose, of course, would neither be to direct stories nor to provide any editorial oversight, but simply to enrich our mutual understanding of this complex country. Given the rapidly evolving political developments, these insights would serve to improve programming and that is our joint goal.

14. (SBU) I am confident that we can build on the great success Studio 7 has had to date to create a program that adapts quickly and is consistently relevant to Zimbabwe's evolving situation. I stand ready to work with the BBG to implement the points mentioned above along with my staff at the Embassy and the USAID/Zimbabwe staff. Through our combined efforts, we can continue improving the quality of Studio 7, greatly expand the listenership and have an even greater effect in promoting change in Zimbabwe. I will be in Washington next week and look forward to meeting with you and hearing your thoughts.

DELL